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SUBJECT: COMOROS EAGER FOR BILATERAL TALKS WITH U.S.

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¶1. SUMMARY. During meetings January 22-23 in the Union of the Comoros, PolEcon Chief and visiting Desk Officer laid the ground work for the first meeting of the U.S.-Comoros Joint Committee for Bilateral Cooperation. The Comoran officials expressed interest in discussing the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) as well as cooperation in others fields, including security. Unless a Washington-based Delegation Head were to become available, Ambassador McGee would lead the first meeting to the Comoros in February or March, potentially to be followed by a second 2007 meeting in the U.S., probably on the margins of the UNGA. END SUMMARY.

¶2. In meetings with Union of the Comoros Vice President Idi's Secretary General and Ministry of External Affairs Secretary General

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(both Deputy equivalents), PolEcon Chief and visiting DeskOff discussed possible topics for bilateral discussions between the Government of the Union of the Comoros (GOC) and the United States. SG Inzouddine suggested discussing qualification for AGOA and asked for more information to pursue Comoros access to U.S. markets under the program. Repeating a request President Sambu made to the Ambassador in an earlier meeting, GOC officials asked about eligibility for a Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact. Acknowledging Comoros might be a long road away from meeting the requirements, officials asked only that the United States explain where to begin and what steps to take. Comoran Charge d' Affaires to New York Mahmoud Aboud, in Moroni for consultations, tentatively scheduled with DeskOff to visit Washington in the near future for initial discussion with MCC officials about the program. Overall, the GOC sought themes of U.S. friendship and opportunity for the agenda for bilateral talks later this year.

¶3. On format, the GOC officials accepted in principle that Ambassador McGee could lead the delegation to inaugurate the "U.S.-Comoros Joint Committee for Bilateral Cooperation" in the near future, to be followed by higher-level talks, perhaps on the sidelines of meetings in Washington or New York. Vice President Idi, who also holds several key Ministerial portfolios, would open the talks with the Ambassador. A half-day of working-level meetings on AGOA, MCC, possible education and health cooperation, and talks on ongoing security cooperation would round out the agenda.

¶4. While grateful for the frequent contact with U.S. Embassy Antananarivo, SG Inzouddine urged the United States to establish a

permanent presence in Moroni. PolEcon Chief and DeskOff shared that a recommendation for an official American presence in Comoros was under consideration, but no decision has been made. The SG noted that a U.S. diplomatic presence would provide "balance" in Comoros; restating the point that all tangible signs of U.S. friendship "reassured" the Comoran people.

¶5. Finally, both SGs emphasized the need for "economic partners" for development in Comoros. Vice President Idi reportedly wants to encourage geothermal energy projects around the Karthala volcano to meet energy needs - if feasible. Given ExxonMobil's exploration in the Mozambique Channel off Madagascar's coast, GOC officials are also hopeful that Comoros may have petroleum reserves. The GOC would welcome American private sector participation in part of the bilateral talks, if not in energy, then in other promising sectors in Comoros like tourism, agribusiness or light manufacturing (if AGOA becomes a reality).

¶6. Both officials commended the United States for the distance education program just underway in Comoros to train teachers via radio broadcasts. In a separate meeting, the Union Minister of Education affirmed that material and human resources would be devoted to completing the distance education materials. Our interlocutors noted the Peace Corps did a great deal to improve education until the program closed in the mid-1990s. As Post hears regularly, GOC officials made a plea for reopening the Peace Corps program - emphasizing how the Program reassured the Comoran population about American friendship. Secretary General Mouigni recalled a certain "famous" Volunteer, Bob White, who used to sing in the Comoran language on a radio program.

¶7. COMMENT: Surprisingly, an explicit request for financial assistance was not raised in these meetings, although this would obviously be welcome given the budget difficulties in the Comoros. Our interlocutors enthusiastically supported the inauguration of U.S. - Comoros bilateral talks as a sign of friendship and welcomed this series of brainstorming sessions to consider possible

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opportunities. With the Department's consent, Post will continue to flesh out a program for one-day U.S. - Comoros bilateral talks to realize Assistant Secretary Frazer's proposal to President Sambi in September 2006. END COMMENT.

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